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The Mail on Sunday Magazine

NOVEMBER 28, 1982

Would you believe
Kermit
was my father?

Models who've re-made it PAGE 38
Hot fashion PAGE 16

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Battling Lady

November 28, 1919: The first woman to sit as an MP, Nancy, Lady Astor took her seat in the House of Commons. She had won a by-election in the Sutton division of Plymouth after her husband's inherited title debarred him from standing. She was concerned that women should be recognised in their own right, and championed equal pay. She was known widely as 'Our Nancy' and had a reputation of being a socialite. She died in 1964.

Problem licked

December 3, 1795: Sir Rowland Hill, inventor of the penny post, was born at Kidderminster, Worcs. At the age of 12, known as The Calculating Boy, he was teaching at his father's school, and later opened one of his own. Despite government opposition to his ideas to reform the postal system, he wanted pre-payment and a uniform price regardless of the distance a letter travelled. In May 1840 the Penny Black was introduced and caused a revolution in communications in Britain. Roland Hill died in 1899.

Woeful Woody

December 1, 1935: America's most unlikely heart-throb, Woody Allen, was born in Brooklyn, New York. Short, puny, and preoccupied with sex and death, Allen calls himself 'a latent heterosexual'

who wishes he was somebody else. Of sex, he said: 'It was the most fun I had without laughing.' He has been romantically linked with Diane Keaton, Mariel Hemingway and Mia Farrow. He changed his name from Allen Stewart Konigsberg when writing 50 jokes a night for a public relations company and didn't want his friends to know, and went on to make the Oscar-winning film *Annie Hall*. For 26 years he has consulted a psychiatrist and has rejected suicide because 'knowing my luck, it would only be a temporary solution'. He does manage to derive some pleasure from life – by playing clarinet.

Some dancing

November 29, 1895: Busby Berkeley, the man who brought on the dancing girls and revolutionised the

Hollywood musical, was born in Los Angeles. His shows transformed hundreds of girls into living geometric patterns, of waterfalls and pyramids. He used only one camera, never shot a second take and always picked his dancers by looking at their eyes. 'I don't need to see the bathing costumes to judge them,' he said. He married six times and died in Palm Springs in 1976, aged 80, having clearly achieved his one and only real ambition: 'To make people happy.'

Sharp thinking

December 2, 1901: The first safety razor using a disposable blade was patented by King Camp Gillette. His boss had earlier patented a disposable cork and knew that if something could be used only once people would come back for more. Perhaps not

surprisingly, Gillette had the idea of such a razor while shaving, but was stumped for someone to make a small, sharp blade cheaply enough. With the help of a mechanic he opened the Gillette company above a fish store in Boston in September, 1901. Sales began two years later, but only 51 people bought the razors and only 168 blades were used. A year later 90,000 had been bought and more than 12½ million blades disposed of. But it was 70 years before the first completely disposable razor was marketed.

Warrior Winston

November 30, 1874: Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill was born at Blenheim Palace, Oxon. At school he showed no particular promise, later saying, 'No one ever succeeded in making me write

a Latin verse or learn any Greek – except the alphabet. He scraped into the military academy of Sandhurst, and began his long political career in 1900 as Unionist MP for Oldham, before joining the Liberals and later the Conservatives. In 1940, with nothing to offer but 'blood, toil, tears and sweat', he formed a coalition government to steer us through the war years. In 1958, a trust set about building the nation's tribute to its greatest wartime leader – Churchill College, Cambridge. Churchill died seven years later and became the only commoner to have a state funeral attended by members of the Royal Family.

Palace flare-up

November 30, 1936: More than a million people visited it every year, it had cost £1½ million to construct, using 24 miles of glass. But it collapsed in less than 12 minutes into a molten river, as 150ft high flames alerted London that the Crystal Palace was on fire. Built as part of the Great Exhibition of 1851, it was moved to Sydenham in 1852 and opened to the public in 1854. No one died in the fire and even the Palace cat, Minnie, escaped, but more than £20,000 worth of sheet music was lost. Some people hired planes to watch the blaze. In an ironically prophetic note, William Makepeace Thackeray had earlier written of Crystal Palace: 'Great blazing arch of lucid glass.'



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The world beyond the Muppets



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF ITS

The Muppets were cute, cuddly and made a fortune. The creatures from *The Dark Crystal* are malformed, sometimes malevolent and cost \$30 million. Will the darker visions of Muppets' creator Jim Henson, who seeks to replace fun with fantasy, usurp Kermit and Miss Piggy in our affections or drive us under cinema seats in fear? David Snow reports on the birth of the Skeksis, the Gelflings and Podpersons, due here in February

Good versus evil in The Dark Crystal. While the Gelflings (above) are thoroughly nice, the Skeksis (right) are as despicable a bunch as you're ever likely to encounter





The Muppet Men are back. But anyone excited by the prospect of further adventures of Miss Piggy and her reluctant swain Kermit the Frog, Animal the mad drummer and the rest of the gang had better think again. This time around Muppet king Jim Henson and his associate Frank Oz (who operates Miss Piggy) have come up with a new set of characters who are far removed from the lovable pigs, frogs and bears we're used to. In fact, some of their new creations are downright repulsive. There are the vicious, reptilian Skeksis; beetle-like, killer troops called Garthrim and a High Chamberlain figure who is Evil Incarnate. Together with the Land Striders, the Gelflings and the urRu, they inhabit the weird world of a \$30 million fantasy film, *The Dark Crystal*.

According to co-producer Gary Kurtz, who also produced *Star Wars*, 'We want to see fantasy become one of the accepted genres which are used for films every year. *Star Wars* did the trick for science fiction and we're hoping *The Dark Crystal* will be the breakthrough film for fantasy.'

Conceived to appeal to adults and student audiences rather than young children, *The Dark Crystal* is Jim Henson's pet project, the film he's wanted to make for years before the international success of the Muppets enabled him to raise the finance. A mild, bearded man with a gift for creating a family atmosphere even on a pressured film set, Henson admits: 'I'm not a science fiction or fantasy buff. What I do love, though, is creating whole worlds, starting from scratch and making everybody who is in it. We've invented everything in *The Dark Crystal* right down to the sort of cups these creatures would drink from and the food they'd eat. Most films begin with someone writing a script. In our case, we began by developing the creatures. The reason the film took four years to make was the research we put into the puppets.'

Work began on *The Dark Crystal* – the title refers to a magic crystal which keeps the evil Skeksis in power – in New York in 1978. By the time the film was shot in England in the summer of 1981, 480 people were involved (as against, say, 150 for a normal film). One of the key members of the production team was British fantasy artist Brian Froud, whom Henson hired on the strength of his picture books like *The Land Of Froud*.

'Nothing was defined about my role at the beginning,' Froud recalls. 'We had a sort of Muppet summit meeting in New York and talked about the characters, then we began building endless prototypes. No one had ever done anything like this before, so we just had to feel our way. As it's turned out, *The Dark Crystal* is totally opposite in style to the Muppets. The Muppets were very simple puppets in bright colours with instantly identifiable characters.'

'The puppets in *The Dark Crystal* are more ambitious and complex – the High Chamberlain alone has 21 moving parts – and they're sort of wrinkly-looking, in muted colours. Each scene in the finished film is like a special effect, the kind of thing most horror films, for instance, save up for the last three seconds. We're giving people that quality all the way through the film.'

While Henson, Oz and Froud were developing *The Dark Crystal*, – and Henson and Oz continued to produce *The Muppet Show* – they were approached by Gary Kurtz, who was then producing *The Empire Strikes Back*, the second in the *Star Wars* series. 'We wanted a special creature as a surprise in *Empire*,' Kurtz says, 'and Jim and his



Above: the Skeksis Historian may be short of sight, but he's long on evil.

Right: Jen and Kira aboard the only form of public transport in the kingdom of the Dark Crystal, the leggy Landstriders.

Below: Frank Oz and Jim Henson, Muppet masters determined to convert us to their monster fantasies.

Bottom: one of Brian Froud's inspirational drawings, the head of a Skeksis surrounded by astronomical symbols



team are simply the best at creature development in the world. We went to see them and they agreed to work with us, partly as a trial run for *The Dark Crystal*.' The result was Yoda, the long-eared, gnome-like Master who undertakes to teach Luke Skywalker the secrets of The Force. 'Yoda,' Froud feels, 'is halfway between the Muppets and the creatures in *The Dark Crystal*.'

By July 1979, work on *The Dark Crystal* had progressed sufficiently for supervisor Sherry Amott to pack up and move, lock, stock and barrel, from New York to London, to a new headquarters near Henson's Hampstead home.

'I turned over my packing case and that became my desk. For the first three weeks we had no phone so I'd walk over to Jim's house and use his. I found literally everything I needed through the Yellow Pages!'

'Everything' included artificial eyes, melted plastic soldiers (for the Skeksis' strange jewellery) and a special kind of foam rubber made in Boston. 'The foam was a problem. I'd thought anything I could find in America I could also find in England. But the main use for this particular foam is in air-conditioners and you don't use air-conditioners in this country.'

To assist her, Sherry Amott assembled a team including art school graduates, dressmakers, puppet makers and people who had worked on props and costumes in the theatre. 'They were >14





Jen and Kira seek a forest sanctuary. Can they become the Burton and Taylor of the 80s?



The astonishing Aughra, Keeper of Secrets, also doubles as a one-eyed astronomer



Even Gelflings start small. Jen learns the secrets of runes from the Master of urRu



The deserved punishment for malicious Chamberlains who persecute innocent Gelflings



The evil guardian of the Dark Crystal. A Skeksis in the flesh – the reptilian Ritual Master

13< all people who, in the normal course of things, would never meet. There are traditional barriers between their different crafts. It was great to see them getting together and swapping skills. By the end of the film, they were all saying, "This is great. Why can't we work like this more often?"

While Amott's team built the characters, Henson was writing the script. He kept it deliberately simple. *The Dark Crystal* tells the story of Jen the Gelfling and his quest to replace a missing shard of the Dark Crystal, thus ending the Skeksis's domination of his world. It sounds like 'The Muppets Meet The Lord Of The Rings' but Henson denies any outside influences.

The Muppets were cuddly and cute and made a fortune. Will audiences react to the darker vision of *The Dark Crystal* in the same way? Henson and Oz admit it's a giant gamble and say they're grateful to Lord Grade for underwriting it. But, they insist, the Muppets had to come to an end 'while we were still enjoying them and before we ran out of ideas – or guests'.

Adds Frank Oz: 'The Muppets aren't dead by any means. We won't be doing any more TV shows, but we still have a great time performing those characters. In fact, in the early months of shooting *The Dark Crystal* we were also doing Polaroid commercials with the Muppets on weekends. We went from the very difficult work on the film to what was like a vacation for us. We were laughing until we cried. That was proof to us that we still wanted to do the Muppets.'

Oz has worked for Henson for 18 years and can remember Muppet characters before they became the Muppets. In fact, they began in commercials, then gradually appeared in guest slots on American TV variety shows. 'Ralph, the dog, was the star in those days,' Oz says. 'I remember we tried to get Kermit on one show and nobody wanted him – they said, no thanks, not a frog.' Oz also professes himself baffled by Miss Piggy's rise to stardom. 'The truth is, she's not very tall, she doesn't do a lot as a puppet and, of course, she's not human. Yet her character has transcended all of that and become this huge star. I've no idea how it happened though.'

Does Frank Oz think there maybe a potential Miss Piggy in *The Dark Crystal*?

'Well, I have a soft spot for the High Chamberlain. He's a bad guy, he'd kill his own mother, but he'd smile while he was doing it. The creature was all made, but it was my idea to include the smile. That's the way I see him.'

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The High Chamberlain. Is he really, as Frank Oz believes, the next puppet pin-up?